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ABSTRACT

A comparison is presented of how teachers, students, and parents perceive the climate of the secondary schools in Greenfield, Massachusetts, as measured by responses to eight selected value statements about the purposes of the school. Agreement among teachers, students, and parents indicates a school climate of collaboration, while disagreement denotes alternative, potentially conflicting beliefs producing a school climate of contention. The data suggest that Greenfield students are more confident than their parents or teachers about the ability of the school to prepare them for later life. According to the students, whatever purposes parents and teachers think should be emphasized are being emphasized. By contrast, parents and teachers identified considerable differences between what they wish to emphasize and what they believe is being emphasized. These results suggest that the differences in teacher, parent, and student perceptions about the purposes of the school will have important implications for the question of school effectiveness in Greenfield. (TE)

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DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM CLIMATE: A COMPARISON OF TEACHER, STUDENT AND PARENT ATTITUDES IN ONE MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

The social organization of schools is a dominant theme of the "new sociology of education" (Karabel and Halsey, 1977). Characterized by one observer as a "quiet revolution in educational research" (Walberg, 1979), studies have concentrated on "the context for teaching and learning" and "the nature of the school experience for both staff and pupils" (Rutter, 1979, p. 106).

Included in the domain of this new sociology is research on the effectiveness of schools. This research contends that effective schools produce more positive behavior patterns and higher levels of academic achievement in their students (Berman and McLaughlin, 1980; Miller and Wolf, 1978; Rutter, 1979).

School climate has been identified as one of the characteristics which determines how effectively schools function (Rutter, 1979; Brookover, 1979; Lehming and Kane, 1981; Sarason, 1981; and Edmonds, 1982). In these studies, climate is defined as the "atmosphere" of a school building. It is the impressions, moods and feelings one experiences when walking the corridors, sitting in the classrooms, or standing on the playgrounds.

Rutter (1979) believes climate is a product of the beliefs and values expressed by people in a school. "Can all students learn," "Do schools make a difference," "Should parents decide what is taught," and "Is excellence recognized" are each examples of beliefs and values which can define the climate of a school or a classroom.

In effective schools, it is argued that people share common beliefs and values about school and schooling. The climate of these schools is characterized by a sense of purpose, an atmosphere of order and quiet, and a feeling of pleasure in learning. There are high expectations for students to do well academically which account in part for higher levels of student achievement. And, there is a clearly defined academic mission which students, teachers, and parents understand and support. By extension, the conditions set for effective school climate apply simultaneously to classrooms as well.

This paper presents a comparison of how teachers, students, and parents perceive the climate of their schools, in the city of Greenfield Massachusetts, as measured by responses given to a series of value statements about the purposes of school.

Our research approach is derived from Rutter's study of twelve inner London secondary schools. Rutter examined differences between schools as a way of assessing an institutional effect of schools on student performance.

To examine climate, we assessed whether teachers, students, and parents view purposes of school differently. The goal was to determine the degree of presence of a climate of shared beliefs and values within the schools. We hypothesized that agreement between teachers, students, and parents on the purposes of school would suggest the presence of common

school beliefs and support a school climate of collaboration. By contrast, disagreement would indicate the presence of alternate, potentially conflicting, beliefs and produce a school climate of contention.

PROCEDURE

Our research is a product of a four-year education project (1977-1981) conducted jointly by the Greenfield Massachusetts Public Schools, the Massachusetts Department of Education, and the University of Massachusetts School of Education. Greenfield, a community of approximately 18,000 in the northwestern part of the state, had been chosen as a rural field site of the Department of Education's Secondary School Planning Project. Two secondary schools, a high school, and a junior high school were the focus of the project.

An overall needs assessment was conducted. The process was subdivided into three similar, yet distinct, survey instruments administered by committees representing the teachers, students, and parents. A Staff Development Committee assumed responsibility for surveying all members of the faculty and administration of the secondary schools (N=110). A Student Advisory Committee coordinated the surveying of all senior high and junior high (N=1081) students. Of the 1191 survey instruments distributed, 1107 were completed (92.9 percent return). A Community

Advisory Committee conducted a random sampling of the community (N=3600). A 31 percent return was recorded (1116 completed surveys).

Eight purposes of schooling, identified in Table I, chosen by the committees, were included on the needs assessment questionnaire. Teachers, students, and parents were asked to rate each purpose on a 0-3 scale from "not emphasized" to "strongly emphasized" in terms of their perceptions of their school.

Table I

Selected Purposes of Schooling

* Prepare for further schooling
* Concern for the needs of others
* Improve social and economic status
* Prepare for the 1980's
* Prepare for jobs and careers
* Fulfill self as a person
* Develop intellectual abilities
* Respect for the rules of society

Disagreements between what purposes of school "should be emphasized" and what purposes of schools are "being emphasized" were found between groups throughout the eight categories. Figure I presents findings of selected purposes of schools that teachers, students, and parents believe should be emphasized. Figure II presents findings of selected purposes

of schools that teachers, students, and parents believe are presently being emphasized.

Figure I

Mean Ratings for Teacher, Student and Parent Response
on What Selected Purposes of School Should Be Emphasized
(0-3 Scale From Not Emphasized to Strongly Emphasized)

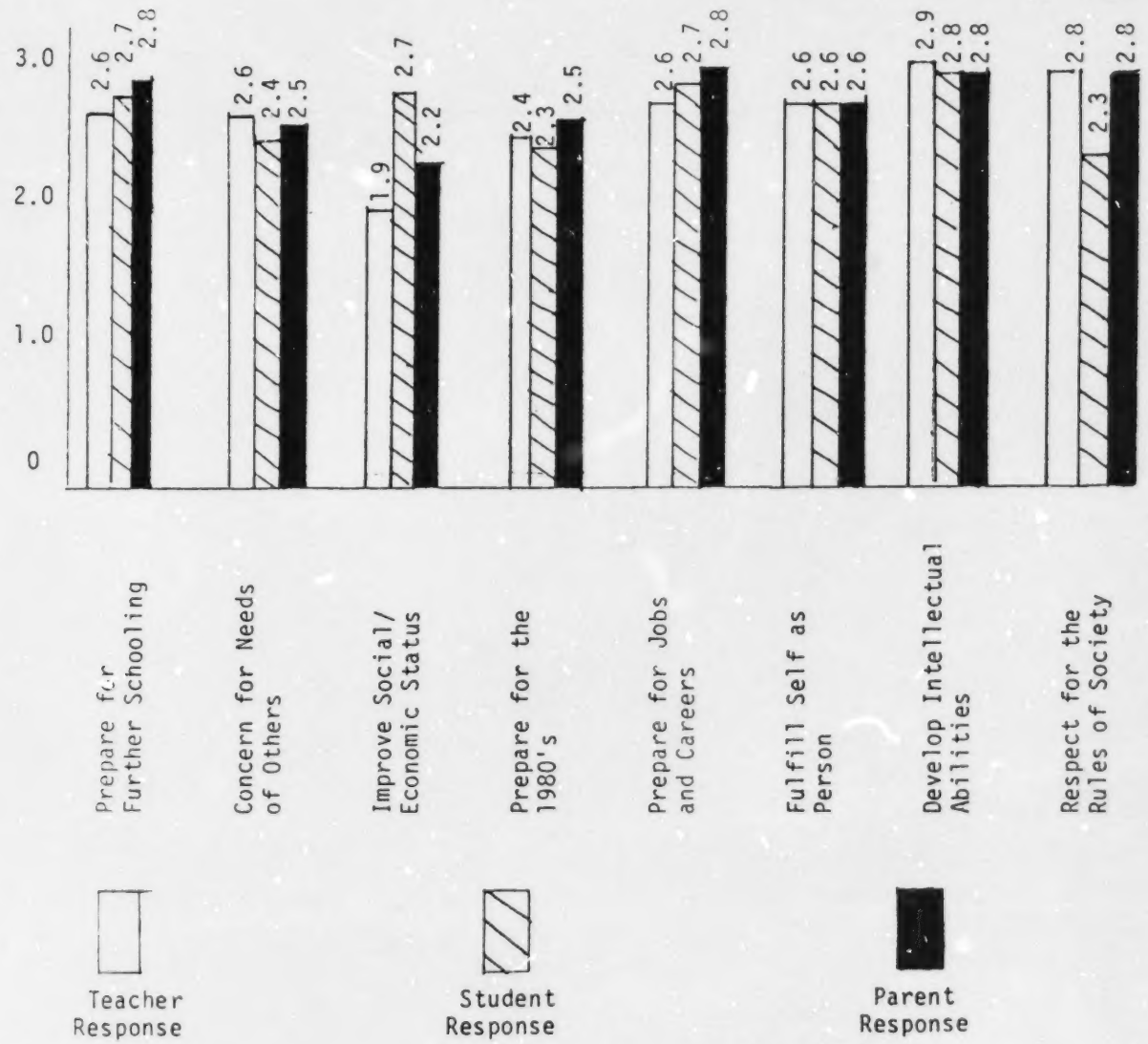

Figure II

Mean Ratings for Teacher, Student, and Parent Response on Perceived Emphasis of Selected Purposes of Schools (0-3 Scale from Not Emphasized to Strongly Emphasized)

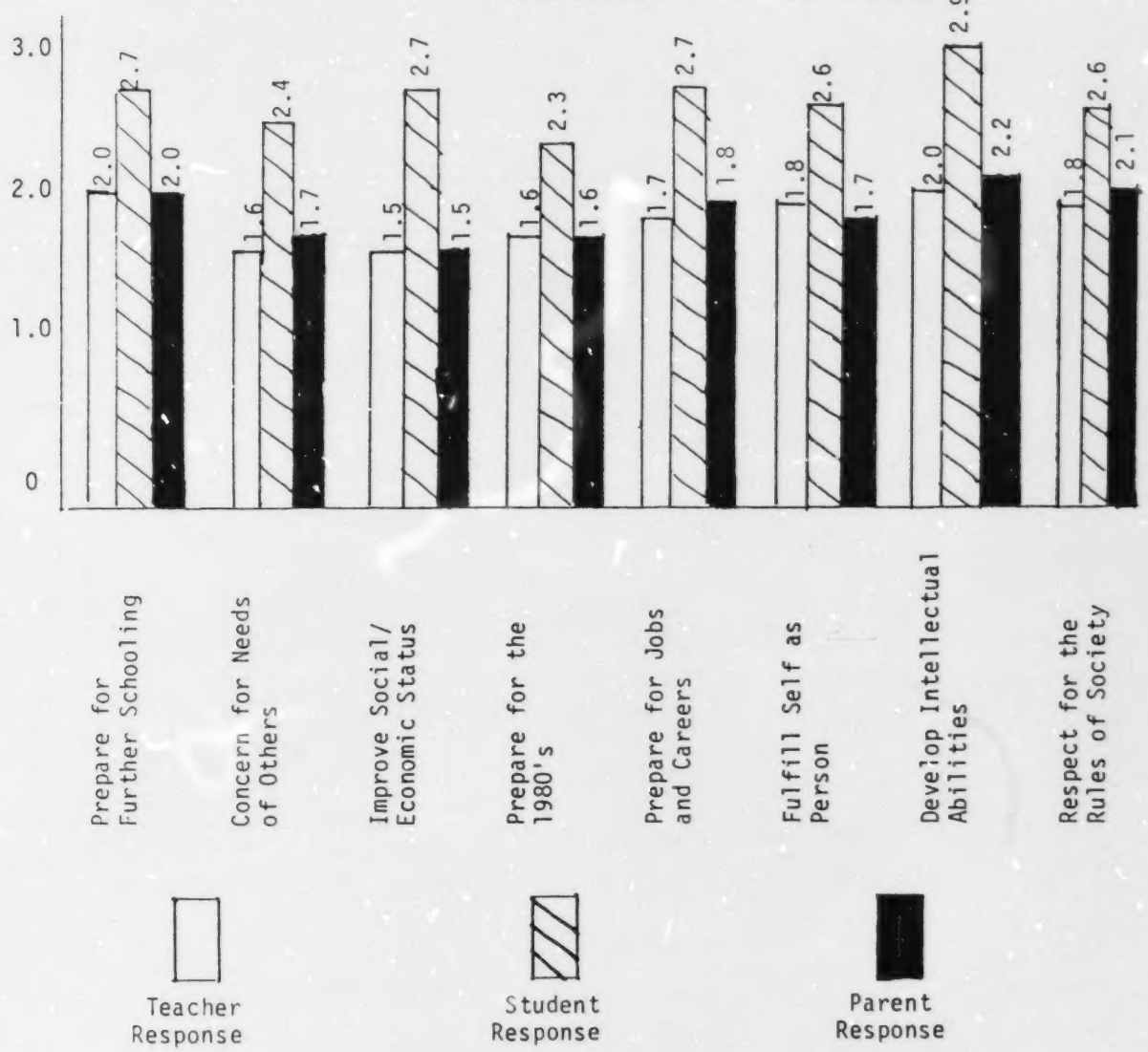

Figure I illustrates that the views of teachers, students, and parents on the ideal purposes of schools are remarkably similar. These three groups break asunder, however, when actual school situations and day-to-day practices are examined resulting in two distinctly different groups and opinions. The students view everyday school life as meeting their expectations while teachers and parents rate these same activities as falling short of their expectations.

Students in Greenfield felt more positively than their parents or teachers about the ability of school to prepare them for later life. According to the students, whatever purposes parents and teachers think should be emphasized are being emphasized. By contrast, parents and teachers identified considerable differences between what they wished would be emphasized and what they thought was being emphasized.

CONCLUSION

Based on our survey results, we conclude the climate of the Greenfield Secondary Schools is characterized by differences in the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students. These findings have important implications for the question of school effectiveness in Greenfield.

Research of effective schools contends that positive school climate includes a sense of order and purpose and high expectations for student achievement through an academic mission clearly understood and widely supported by faculty, parents, and students. In Greenfield, we see an

orderly and purposeful climate as difficult to achieve given the divergent views of purposes reported by the groups in our study.

Similarly, creating high expectations for student achievement will be difficult when the opinions of parents and teachers are in marked contrast to those of the student body regarding what is actually being achieved in school. A clear academic mission will remain unrealized as long as a gap exists between the groups' opinions of how well the purposes of school are being realized in their schools.

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